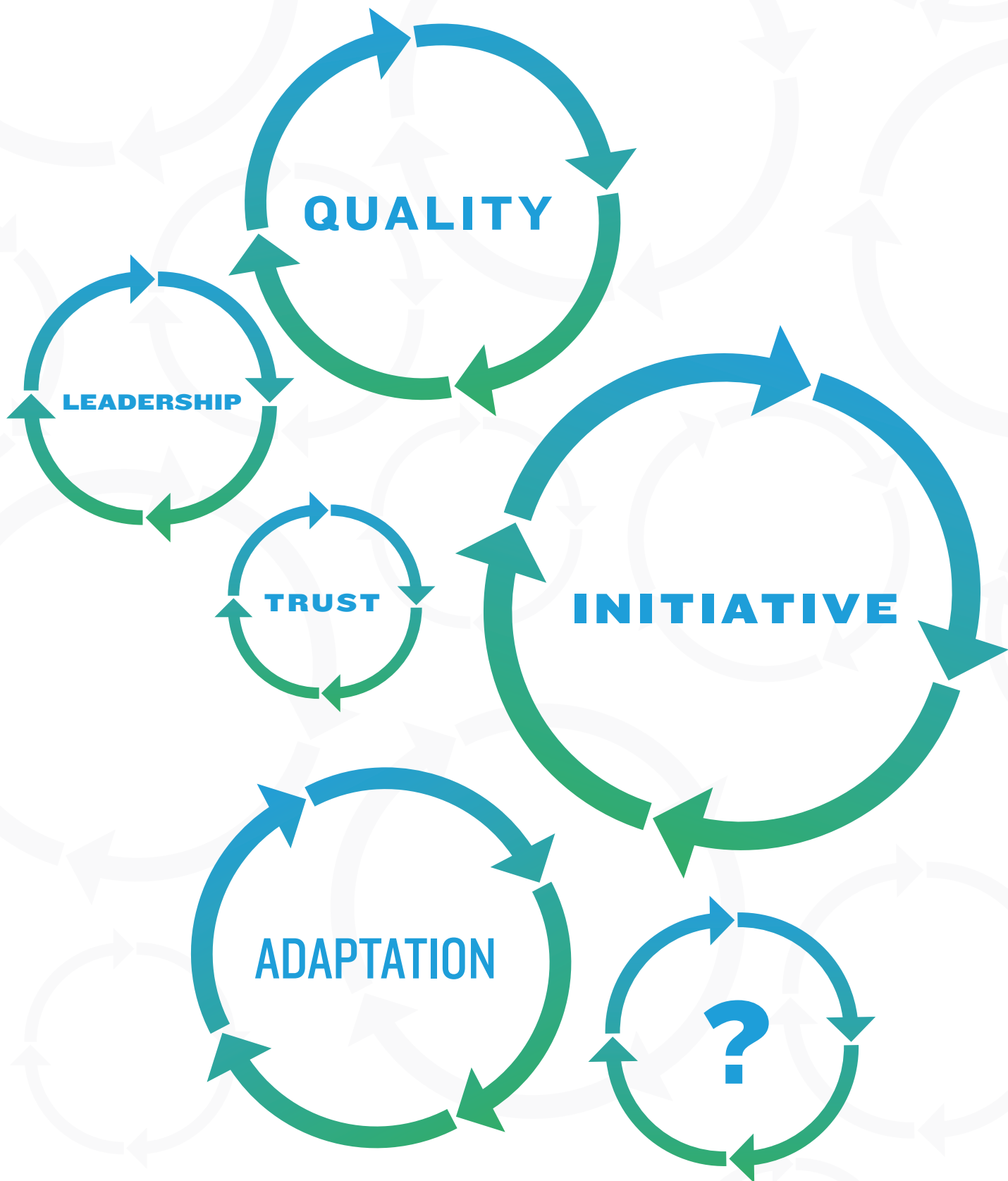


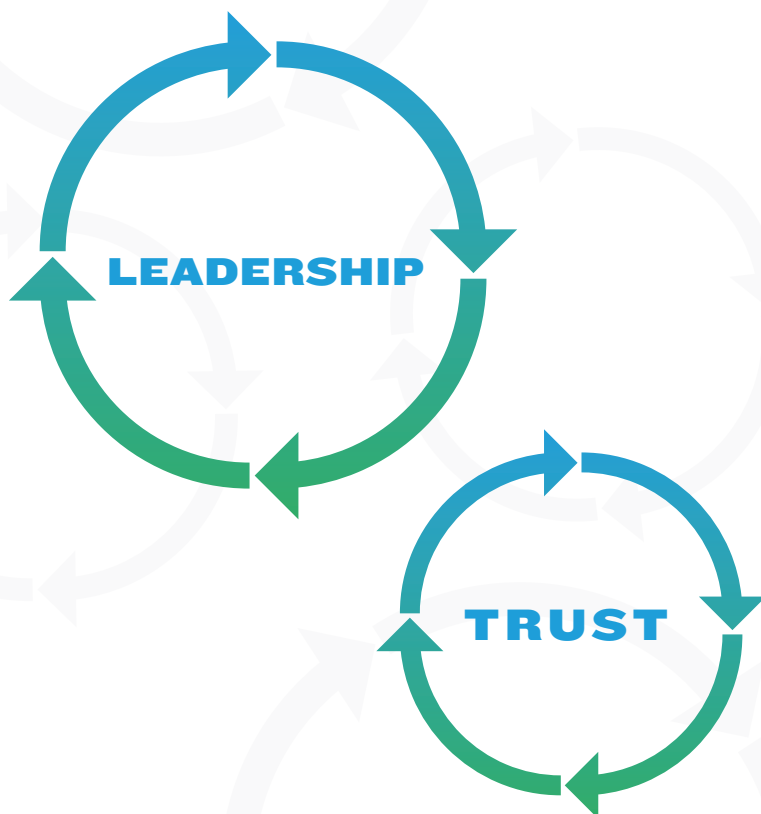
# **CHANGE AND THE SCHOOL LIBRARIAN**

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## **AN EXPERIENCE IN EVOLUTION**





“Change—rapid and pervasive—may be the single most important characteristic of life in the twentieth century” (AASL and AECT 1988, 3). That sentence from *AASL’s Information Power: Standards for School Library Programs* set the context for school library programs at the end of the twentieth century. *Information Power* placed the school librarian at the center of the school reform movement, and it changed the conversation about what makes a good school library. It moved school libraries away from quantitative standards mandating collection size and facility seating to qualitative standards describing how school libraries support instruction.

Looking back now, almost forty years later, we have to sagely agree that this statement was prescient. Rapid and pervasive change, along with occasional instances of cataclysmic change, has indeed

been a hallmark of the past several decades. As a result, the trivia-based conversations regarding overdues and inventory are shrinking under the weight of the far more important conversations regarding SMART goals and assessments. Great school library programs are evaluated on what the librarian does, not what the library owns. And, most importantly, the attributes of a strong school librarian are more likely to be described using terms related to leadership traits rather than skills.

*Information Power* was published at the height of the school reform movement. Site-based management was in vogue as a touted organizational improvement strategy. Principals were encouraged to form management teams of faculty to make decisions about large goals such as the school’s mission, vision, and budget dissemination.

School librarians were encouraged to come out of the library and get involved in those teams (Barron 1994). Many did just that, and for the first time school librarians were discussing school-wide change with their administrators. Although the evaluations of school reform note that most of the decisions relegated to the site-based teams were minor topics such as budget dissemination, even this limited authority still instigated decisions that gave school librarians a platform on which to discuss ways their purchases supported school-wide learning (Lashway 1997).

The literature in both education and library science since the 1980s has encouraged school librarians to support education change through service to school-wide initiatives. The difference in the literature from the last century to this one is the transition from a reactive stance to a proactive one. The former encouraged librarians to gain strength by supporting school reform initiatives initiated by the administration. Now, just the reverse is happening. School librarians are encouraged to present initiatives that would garner the support of the administration. School librarians are expected to propose instructional reform, train others in new concepts and principles, lead in the implementation, and assess the impact of those changes. School librarians have the power to create whole school change, rather than stand in line to be granted it. It is the evolution of leadership in the school library field.

### The Importance of Leadership

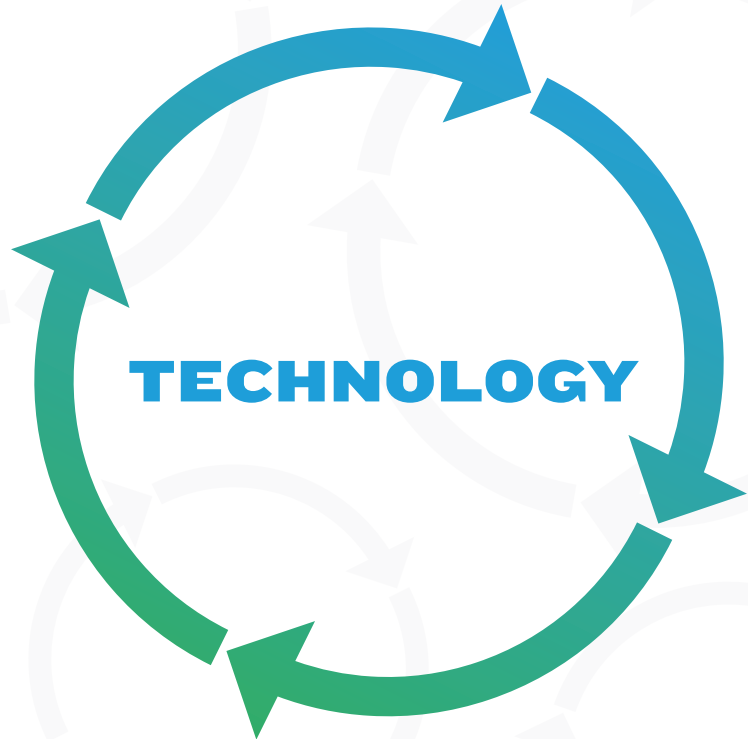
This change in leadership role to some extent parallels the change in how leadership in institutions was viewed over this same time period. The seminal work in this area is

James MacGregor Burns's *Leadership* (1978), which is still required reading for most educational administration coursework. This work discusses leadership as a teachable set of skills rather than an attribute based on fate and happenstance. It also analyzes traits of known leaders in specific situations and introduces leadership as something that could be practiced by anyone in an organization. Burns notes:

"Traditional conceptions of leadership tend to be so dominated by images of presidents and prime ministers speaking to the masses from on high that we may forget that the vast preponderance of personal influence is exerted quietly and subtly in everyday relationships." (442)

More importantly, leadership is portrayed as something that could be taught, encouraged, and evaluated. The school administrator's ability to lead a school is considered to be an important attribute in hiring and evaluation.

Leadership in schools has evolved from an institutional approach defined as school librarians seizing administrator-centered leadership opportunities to one that makes leadership a personal mission. In 2013 Sheryl Sandberg exhorted women to ignore the childhood teases of being bossy girls and to lean in to leadership. She noted "We hold ourselves back in ways both big and small, by lacking self-confidence, by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning in" (2013, p. 8). Ann Martin does much the same in her work encouraging school librarians to perform as data-driven leaders in schools (2013).





# INSTRUCTION

This evolution in how personal leadership is viewed in organizations is mirrored by how organizations themselves are studied. The concept of leadership as a personal attribute, as well as an organizational characteristic, has also evolved over the past several decades.

## Achieving Organizational Excellence

The time period of the 1980s to the 2000s is bracketed by two books that look at organizational improvement strategies. In 1982 Thomas Peters and Robert H. Waterman published *In Search of Excellence*, and in 2001, Jim Collins followed with *Good to Great*. Both books were the result of

intensive study of large companies to discover their secrets to success. For Peters and Waterman, the answer is eight basic practices; and for Collins, five findings. A conclusion that both share is the importance of hiring the right people and then trusting them to do their jobs.

One of the basic practices from Peters and Waterman involves showing trust in employees and seeking both employee and customer input in all phases of the organization. Collins maintains this same focus on employees, but instead he emphasizes hiring as a key strategy to ensure organizational success.

The evolution of both of these viewpoints has impacted school librarians. The role of the school librarian has evolved, as with leadership, to look more at what a strong school librarian does, rather than the passive strength of the position itself as a building block in the school's infrastructure.

## School Reform

The school reform efforts of the past century focused on structure, and school librarians were encouraged to serve on and chair school reform committees. Today's reforms focus on instruction, and school librarians are expected to engage in these efforts (Kimmel 2012).

The education field has only limited research to evaluate the impact of the reform efforts. However, the role of the school librarian and others in these reform efforts has been assessed. After a decade of encouraging whole school reform, a research study based in Kentucky found that principals regarded school librarians as only "somewhat important" to the success of the school reform effort (Alexander, Smith, and Carey 2003). There are encouraging signs, though, that individual school administrators value the school librarian as a central figure in change efforts in the school (Edwards, 2012).

## What Does the Future Hold?

The past thirty years have seen tremendous changes in education and in school librarianship. For the most part, the AASL standards have kept up with these changes (AASL and AECT 1988, 1996; AASL 2009). The curriculum for school library preparation has also reflected the changes necessary to teach these roles (Kwan and Turner 2014). The early part of this time period provided the impetus for organizational change on a grand scale. Change became an accepted part of the organizational landscape, and over time it became the norm rather than the exception. Indeed, stability in an organization, although it may be praised on the surface, may also be perceived as a negative. As society embraces trends that are rapidly introduced and just as rapidly discarded, so too do organizations. Schools embrace the latest technology trends, sometimes of their own volition, and sometimes forced by well-meaning legislators who see themselves as educational experts.

School librarians who embraced the educational evolution of the past decades are thriving today. They are discovering sound educational

uses for technology innovations and collecting data to document success. More and more, school administrators are relying on the school library as more than just a great place to hold teacher workshops. They are using school librarians as innovation laboratories where educators and students can experiment with new educational ideas.

Whether or not the school library profession can capitalize on the continuing education evolution ahead of us depends on the same three components that got us here. The changing definition of leadership, of organizational excellence, and of school reform brought us to this point in the

education landscape. For the future, the dispositions of the school librarian, the definition of excellence in school librarianship, and the changing structure of the school library will be of paramount importance.



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